Professor Delta Quinn teams with investigative reporter Caleb Barthes to unravel the mystery of the zombie seed, the genetically-modified follow-up to the “terminator seed.” This fact-based fiction is an academic novel that relies on fast-paced action as well as theoretical insights. Using the cultural icon of the zombie to address work alienation and contemporary apathy is perfect for the purposes of having the reader examine corporate greed in a global world. The cast of characters brings this global aspect to life. In the backdrop of the novel, a history of the zombie unfolds—a history of the violence that Haiti and African diaspora have suffered. Yet, it is Delta’s research into narratives of partner abuse that lead her to grapple with her own tragic past and take brave steps toward ending the abuse of others. This social justice book is based on award-winning research in rhetorical ethnography and is being assigned for courses in rhetoric, ethnography, narrative, organizational communication, and diversity, but would fit with others (e.g., ethics, interpersonal, public relations, journalism, sociology, philosophy) where examining the individual’s role in the life-world is not only promoted but expected. If the novel doesn’t do it, then the facts found at the end of the book should “wake up” any remaining zombies.

Robin Patric Clair is a Full Professor, Diversity Fellow and a Fellow to the Center of Creative Endeavors at Purdue University. She has won research awards in rhetoric, narrative, ethnography and organizational communication, including two ‘Outstanding Book of the Year’ awards, two ‘Best Research Article of the Year’ awards, the ‘Golden Anniversary Award’ and multiple ‘Top Paper’ Awards for her research.
ZOMBIE SEED AND THE BUTTERFLY BLUES
The *Social Fictions* series emerges out of the arts-based research movement. The series includes full-length fiction books that are informed by social research but written in a literary/artistic form (novels, plays, and short story collections). Believing there is much to learn through fiction, the series only includes works written entirely in the literary medium adapted. Each book includes an academic introduction that explains the research and teaching that informs the book as well as how the book can be used in college courses. The books are underscored with social science or other scholarly perspectives and intended to be relevant to the lives of college students—to tap into important issues in the unique ways that artistic or literary forms can.

Please email queries to pleavy7@aol.com

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Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues

A Case of Social Justice

By

R.P. Clair
Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA

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PRAISE FOR
ZOMBIE SEED AND THE BUTTERFLY BLUES

“Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues is a gripping story about corporate conspiracy and exploitation, relational violence, and the value of social research. A masterpiece of literary technique and thick description, this book illustrates how lives can connect in complex and unnerving ways—from everyday interactions with strangers, friends, and partners to authorities, histories, and institutions riddled with corruption and neglect. An ideal text for courses on relationships, organizational life, and narrative research, and a must-read for anyone interested in environmentalism, creative writing, and social justice.”

—Tony E. Adams, Author: Narrating the Closet: An Autoethnography of Same-Sex Attraction

“Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues is not only a wonderful read, it’s compelling and thought-provoking. I loved it!”

—Donald Bain, Author: The “Murder, She Wrote” novels.

“Zombie Seed and Butterfly Blues is a rare book! A compelling story of social justice and a detective story! It will also make an excellent text for outside-the-box courses in organizational rhetoric and qualitative methods.”

—Dr. Dean Scheibel, award-winning researcher and teacher, Loyola Marymount University
“Robin Clair uses fiction to teach us—scholars, teachers, and students of human communication—how to bring social research closer to the richness and complexity of lived experience. Ethnographic fieldwork is not only a method of putting oneself in the shoes of another, but also a way of using our experience in another’s world to reflect critically on our own. Clair shows that one of the best ways to do this is to tell a good story, one that could be true. *Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues* takes students on a journey reminiscent of fieldwork, one that will broaden their horizons and enable them to see connections where once they only saw divisions. Clair realizes that the actual may not be as important as the possible and that the greatest deficiency of social science is its lack of imagination. She wants us to pay attention to the world and to enlarge our sense of responsibility and conscience. *Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues* offers a corrective to social science’s obsession with producing a mountain of facts bereft of truth. Through the canon of fiction and the mystery novel, Clair evokes the sound and feel of lived reality, filling the gaps that normally exist between author and reader, fact and truth. The result is a story that encourages us to keep pressing the case for higher standards of justice and truthfulness.”

—Arthur P. Bochner, Distinguished Professor of Communication, University of South Florida

“Clair has beautifully woven narrative threads from present day academia, classical and modern myth, and critical environmental discourse into an educational and thrilling story. The resulting complex tapestry provides educators, or those simply seeking to enjoy the journey with Delta, a unique and exciting opportunity to engage.”

—Dr. Rebekah Fox, Assistant Professor, Texas State University-San Marcos Editor, *Communication Law Review*
“Robin Clair’s novel, *Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues*, is a great read … Clair uses her natural gift of narrative and her in-depth knowledge of social science’s ethnography to unfold quite an amazing story, from quite an amazing voice. The novel is destined to be a must read in classrooms, discussion groups, and book clubs.”

—Leonard Cox, Producer, playwright, and award-winning, documentary filmmaker—River Films  
Senior Officer, Columbia University

“There is much talk about the ‘novel of ideas’—*Zombie Seeds and the Butterfly Blues* is an illustration of the great power of this genre. It is about ideas certainly: our ideas about science, about nature, about history. But it is also a narrative about the idea of narratives: what stories can and should be able to do, whose stories get told clearly and whose must wait for others to re-tell them, and the dissatisfactions of stories that don’t turn out the way we hoped.

As an excellent narrative encourages, I started to chart its relation to other narratives and designed multiple courses in my head about the role of narratives in and around science and biomedicine. I will be teaching *Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues* in courses with science and literature students as this is a story with much to offer students across the University.

As I read the concluding chapter, the daily news tells me that there are more lawsuits about herbicide resistant crops, more concern about genetically manipulated crops escaping the boundaries we hoped to set for them. I do hope that there are Delta Quinn’s out there with the courage to find the stories that are not in the news, or at least more authors like Robin Clair who insist on the power of narrative in the age of technoscience.”

—Dr. Joan Leach, Science Laureate Director of Teaching and Learning, English, Media Studies and Art History  
Convener, Science Communication Program,  
University of Queensland-Australia
“Storytellers are not onlookers in this battle; we are, if anything, its grand strategists. The dispute over genetic engineering involves facts, to be sure. But its parties disagree far more passionately over the story. They quarrel over the nature of the characters, over the plot, and over the editing. They also feud over the unknowable: the ending.”

—Daniel Charles, author of *Lords of the Harvest*
DEDICATION

To Activists, Artists, and Awakening Zombies

… and to Soul-Searching Scientists
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PREFACE

In Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues: A Case of Social Justice students from a liberal arts class help Professor Delta Quinn and reporter, Caleb Barthes, uncover the political and corporate story behind the scientific development and implementation of the zombie seed. As the secrets of the seed are revealed, so are the secrets of Delta’s tragic past which explain her desire to study the sequestered stories of domestic violence, which may lead the reader to ask whether there is a connection between cultural violence and interpersonal violence, and more importantly, whether such knowledge will awaken the zombie in all of us.

Socrates’ oft quoted maxim—the *unexamined life is not worth living*—speaks to the current image of the zombie who walks through life without critically thinking, without addressing political issues, without participating in civil discourse or democratic entitlements. *Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues: A Case of Social Justice* is meant to engage the college student, to have students address and discuss issues of relevance to society at large. Whether in anthropology, business, communication, English, history, organizational communication, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, rhetoric, sociology or women’s studies the novel is intended to provide a teaching tool to professors who are looking for novel ways to awaken students.

Zombies are far more than a cultural cliché; they are a symbolic icon of crucial importance in the history and practice of oppression and resistance. As such, a zombie theme can be used quite constructively to explain important issues relevant to the college classroom. For instance, zombie stories have a historical, cultural and religious connection to the physical and mental brutality of slavery, especially related to Haiti. This same serious symbol has been used to perpetuate stereotypes of Africans and African diaspora. Overtime the zombie’s symbolism was applied to the mind-numbing aspects of
repetitive, tedious and monotonous labor of any kind—a symbol of workers’ angst and alienation. The meaning behind the zombie symbol was expanded during the early 20th century. In 1932, the movie *White Zombie* introduced an additional element by casting a young, white woman as a character who is turned into a zombie by a white man who wants to marry her against her will. Adding white women to the already existing economic exploitation, racial oppression and sexual violence of Africans and their descendants made clear the sexual lust and licentiousness of the Haitian plantation owners and the expanding use of the zombie symbol.

Contemporary society is teeming with zombie movies, books, games and various paraphernalia. Young people, from high school to college students, are drawn to the zombie discourse. In part this zombie rhetoric captures their attention because it speaks to the mind-numbing aspects of the traditional educational system. There are reasons why the cannibalism associated with zombies is so often directed toward images of eating the human brain. College students fight against the zombie takeover and zombie apocalypse through symbolic games from internet and Xbox games to physically charged games of zombie tag. Students are acting out, performing their own resistance. Or are they? Zombie movies, games, and books also provide entertainment grounded in violence. This violence may provide a cathartic release, especially when humor is laid over the zombie thrill, but it may also encourage aggressive behavior when rewards are attached to the ‘killing of the undead.’ Whichever the case may be, zombies are a part of culture today and deserve to be discussed for their societal implications under the rubric of cultural studies. Using the zombie theme fosters such discussions in the college classroom.

Some professors may not have heard of academic novels and others may have never considered using supplemental texts in the college classroom. I have been using fiction and nonfiction books to stimulate discussion, increase knowledge and connect the drier textbook material to the real life of students for many years and with stunning results. But this is the first time I have written a novel to be read in the classroom and which I hope will have impact beyond the halls of academe.
I say “beyond” because some of the book selections I have made in the past have connected students with their parents in rather special ways. After sharing passages from Studs Terkel’s book, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*, particularly the chapter entitled, *Who Built the Pyramids*, which is about a factory worker who is saving money to put his children through college so that they can have a better life, one student told me that he called home and thanked his parents for paying his tuition. Other students have told me that they have shared synopses of the books that we read in class with their parents and it opens dialogue and begins an exchange of ideas. Some of those books include *Down and Out in Paris and London* by George Orwell, *Lakota Woman* by Mary Ellen Crowdog (and Richard Erdoes), *Rivethead: Tales from the Assembly Line* by Ben Hamper and *Enrique’s Journey*, a Pulitzer prize-winning accomplishment by Sonia Nazario. *Enrique’s Journey* sparked a conversation between a student and her mother; the mother revealed the family history of immigration to her college-age daughter, a story the daughter had not before known. Most of the books that I have assigned have something to do with the meaning of work, work identity, or the role that organizations play in society and the influence that corporations wield. Social justice novels, like *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair, are especially excellent sources for discussion in the classroom. I select these kinds of books because the courses I teach often deal with work, such as Organizational Communication, Diversity at Work and Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations. I hope that professors teaching courses like sociology of work, industrial psychology, organizational behavior, and organizational ethics will find *Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues: A Case of Social Justice* an excellent means of stimulating classroom discussion. And although people do not live at work, they may take work home or they may take the rewards or the wounds of work into their personal lives. *Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues* includes dialectical stories of work: one story of how work changes the life of a young man to the detriment of those around him and another story of one man’s love of his work that brings him great joy and closer to his wife and children. In other words, *Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues: A Case of*
Social Justice need not be restricted to courses related to work. Courses such as interpersonal communication, psychology, and women’s studies classes may also benefit from the book’s use as a supplemental text.

The protagonist of the novel, Professor Delta Quinn is described as an ethno-rhetorician who studies sequestered stories mostly from the world of work, but her studies lead to an overall portrayal of the world of work as a rhetorical creation and a cultural enterprise and professors from rhetoric and anthropology may find the book stimulating. I have designed a syllabus for the course Rhetoric in the Western World that uses the “zombie approach.” In addition, one of the early studies that guided this book based on a small-farm, farm-family culture and the rhetorical construction of identity received the Best Article of the Year award from the ethnography division of the National Communication Association, supporting its possibilities for use in ethnography and rhetoric classes.

In addition, cultural diversity undergirds this book in multiple ways, from exploring the history and cultural heritage of Haiti to the religious intersections between voodoo and Christianity which come together through the lives of the characters in this novel and through Delta Quinn’s revisionist narrative interpretation of the miracles and the magical aspects of religion. I believe Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues: A Case of Social Justice might stimulate dialogue if not debate in diversity and intercultural college classrooms, which was one of my goals in writing it.

Although all of this seems like a perfect fit for courses in the humanities, I believe there is more to Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues as it crosses the divide between liberal arts and the physical sciences. The books that I have assigned most recently include The Boy who Harnessed the Wind by William Kamkwamba and The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks by Rebecca Skloot, both of which provide us with true stories of how the physical sciences intersect with the humanities. Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues: A Case of Social Justice also unites these often bifurcated areas. For science is meant to touch and improve our lives, not alienate us from ourselves. Social problems cannot be so easily segregated these days.
We are no longer naïve concerning the arena in which social problems exist—they exist entangled within every aspect of society. And although we can and do address social problems within narrow parameters, and often times for good reasons, I suggest that we need to add a polysemic approach to our repertoire of literary educational tools. *Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues* is just such an educational-literary novel. Specifically, it crosses traditional academic boundaries. Unconstrained by the invisible barriers that separate science and liberal arts, *Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues* draws students into a world that demonstrates the interrelatedness of the narratives we live and the problems we face.

Interdisciplinary studies may provide the means to finding creative and alternative solutions to contemporary world problems, especially where social-political issues are entangled in the material remedies. This can only be achieved if a dialogue of social justice engages both the physical sciences and the liberal arts. Students of science and students of liberal arts have far too long been divided, not recognizing their interconnectedness. Liberal Arts students lament the technical jargon of the physical sciences and students of the physical sciences express dismissiveness concerning the Liberal Arts, not recognizing the role that anthropology, art, communication, economics, history, literature, philosophy, political science, religious studies, sociology and women’s studies, for instance, play in science. These overlapping worlds have been treated as distinct for far too long. Bringing seemingly disparate fields together through novel approaches may give new insights into the entangled worlds in which we live, giving social justice a chance to surface and spread.

*Zombie Seed and the Butterfly Blues: A Case of Social Justice* is a novel informed by academic research which is grounded in narrative theory. As a scholar of narrative, I explore a wide variety of stories and their means to create reality, but I sincerely hope that what I have created here is an enticing story, and a good read that encourages dialogue concerning a controversial topic.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deepest appreciation to all of the authors listed in the bibliography, without their dedicated efforts my work would not have been possible. Visits to the Newberry Library and the Illinois State Museum Chicago Gallery located in the James R. Thompson Center were crucial to the novel and made possible by my spouse who never hesitated to go on these adventures with me. I am grateful to Judith Burson Lloyd Klauba, Associate Curator, Illinois State Museum Chicago Gallery for our conversation about the archived farmers’ narratives. Many thanks to Ray Little for being Ray Little and allowing me to include him in the novel. My thanks go to Felicia Roberts for correcting my French; Jeffrey Ooms for input on publicity; Brian Britt for formatting and Diana Livingston for her assistance. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Renée and Donald Bain who gave me advice on an earlier version. Their energy and passion for writing amazes me. Without their comments the novel would never have moved with such speed and coherence. I owe my entire family my gratitude as they encouraged me in numerous ways to complete this project—thank you, Tim, Cory, Calle and Shea and to my siblings, Candy, Kate, Jo, Betsy, Bob, Jim, and Drew. Special thanks to my sister, Elizabeth (Betsy) Alder, author of the King’s Shadow and other books, for all the phone conversations filled with encouragement, grammar lessons and writing tips. I am ever so grateful to my partner, Tim, because of him this is a better book in so many ways—thank you for taking trips to Chicago with me, editing the manuscript and providing me with support. To those friends, family, colleagues, and students who encouraged me along the way, especially—Pam and Jim Finucane, Jill Vaught, Devika Chawla, Shirley Simpson, Marv Diskin, Ralph and Ginny Webb, Leonard Cox, Rebekah Fox, Deb Leiter Nyabuti, Isaac Holyoak, Tammy Halsema, Sarah Mooney, Sam and Heather McCormick, Carole Harris, Theon Hill and, of course, Jill Rudd—thank you. I am very grateful to Keith Berry who invited me to present my first study of a
farm family at a preconference at the National Communication Association annual meeting, later invited me to co-author a special edition of *Cultural Studies* with him, and nominated my work for recognition that led to my receiving the Best Article of the Year award for the study. In addition, Keith introduced me to Tony Adams who quickly put me in touch with Patricia Leavy, Series Editor for Sense Publishers. Patricia believed in my work unconditionally and her phenomenal spirit and keen eye in terms of editing made this book a sharper project, indeed. I am thrilled to have my work accepted for publication by this cutting-edge series on academic novels. To Peter de Liefde, founder and owner of Sense Publishers, I am grateful that he took a chance on an academic novel with the word *zombie* in the title. Great thanks to Bernice Kelly for her professional production management and for sharing her unique information about the type of butterfly seen on the cover of this book. Also, I would like to thank Purdue University for providing Human Subject clearance for this project and allowing it to be presented as either scholarly research or fiction. To my students, I say, thank you—your youthful spirits give me energy and your curiosity drives me to learn more. My gratitude would be incomplete without giving tribute to the farm-family whose story set the stage for the first study and acts as the backdrop to this book. However, their names must remain anonymous in order to protect their privacy. Finally, I would be remiss not to mention my parents, who encouraged me as an artist and a writer, may they rest in peace.
PRELUDE

In 1772, an Ethiopian carried a secret in the form of a seed so powerful that he would lay down his life rather than share it with the uninitiated. But his dire circumstances left him no choice. He had been schooled in the properties of the plant—the root, the stem, the leaves, the pollen, the seeds—so as to understand the medicinal contributions of each part. He had been instructed never to say the name of the plant aloud, but rather to simply call it the butterfly as if its power were that of a tiny creature rather than a tiger. It was not only disguised under the name of the butterfly, but it was also literally hidden from view. Ethiopian men of medicine never carried the butterfly seed in the open or even within an herb pouch; instead, upon ordination into the spiritual and physical medicinal arts, they sliced the heel of the sole of the left foot with a burning knife, inserted the seed, and tightly stitched the skin together. So it was for the Ethiopian who carried the seed hidden under his skin to this day, this deplorable day.

Now he lie thinking of the words he had been told so long ago—this seed brings forth the plant that is the salvation of the people, if ever the people are faced with flood or famine or disease, plant this seed. It will restore life.

The Ethiopian smelled death and decay all around him. He needed to pass the seed to the next generation before the ghosts invaded his body and swallowed his spirit. His only hope was the boy who lay shackled next to him.

The boy was neither Ethiopian nor Nubian. His facial features were not as delicate as an Ethiopian’s, not as proud as a Nubian’s and his body was more compact, although thin and bony from starvation, his frame was clearly wider, not long like an Ethiopian’s body.

Head to feet, feet to head, the man and boy lay curled next to each other on a hard, wooden plank within the dark, dank confines of a slave ship. The ship rocked and pitched as did the elder’s stomach. He, who was born of the line of the great King Piye, wretched repeatedly over the side of his plank bed. Naked and bruised, he
knew that his captors were not the captors of his world, where slaves were the result of battle and were freed every seven years to return to their families. No, he knew that the future was lost to him; his legacy would vanish. After all, he had disappointed himself and probably his parents—his Nubian mother and Ethiopian father—by his capture, by falling prey to a nefarious and pernicious plot, which had been simple, effective, and deceptive. He had been accosted by a wayfarer who sought his help. The traveler explained that his companion had taken ill only a short distance away—a kilometer or two—from the village. The dark stranger asked the man for medicine to help. Without hesitation the Ethiopian had grabbed his pouch and headed down the path with the stranger. Just outside of the village, the Ethiopian was struck by a blinding light from a blow to the back of his head.

He awoke hours later to find an ox’s yoke about his neck, his hands bound in front of him, and he was linked to others who were likewise restrained. How many times had he told the children of the village not to wander off alone; he berated himself his error. Now, no descendants would honor him, nor could they even if they wanted to, for he knew, he would never be buried with his ancestors, no Abyssinia rose petals would decorate his grave. Nor would he ever again see the emerald-spotted wood doves, waterbucks and warthogs by sparkling pools of blue, nor gazelles and zebras racing across land. He knew this, he had heard stories; there is no return for those who disappear. He accepted his fate with a cold sweat, never to see his homeland, mother Africa, again.

Jerkig upward abruptly, on a bony elbow, he reeled vomit without warning; foam lingered on his lips. Slumping backward, he realized that his death was imminent and that the boy next to him represented his only hope.

The chains that connected the shackles to the wooden posts were long enough to allow the priest of an auspicious heritage to extract the seeds from their hiding places; his hair, his ears, his nose, his navel and so on. This is where he had hidden the contents of his pouch after his capture at an opportune moment when no one watched him. Now, in the slave ship that rocked and heaved, he pulled the seeds from their hiding places. With each extraction he
placed the seeds into the corresponding orifices of the boy; with each seed came a word of instruction, in a language that the boy didn’t understand. The older man continued nonetheless to burrow into the boy’s hair, burying seeds and talking to him until only one seed remained to be exchanged. This one seed, which had been sewn into the calloused heel of the man’s foot, carried the power to resurrect a people, but the man had no knife with which to free it.

Clanking the heavy iron shackles as he pulled his frail legs tightly toward his swollen and aching abdomen, he tore at his calloused skin with his fingernails; but his fingernails broke away at the tip. Frustrated but intent, he stretched his legs, dug deeper, scraping the nubs of his toenails of his right foot against the spot on the bottom of his left heel in hopes of freeing the final seed, but the calloused tissue was too tough, his toenails too brittle and frail; what was left of the toenails crumbled like dried parchment when grated against his foot. After several attempts, the waning priest fell back exhausted. A small cry escaped his lips.

The boy watched. Although he understood not a single word the older man had uttered to him, he clearly knew the man’s plight. Without a sound, the boy pulled himself closer to the man’s feet. The priest could feel the boy’s breath on the arch of his foot, and then his heel.

The boy ferociously bit the man’s foot.

Gasping with shock and reeling with pain, the captive’s body arched, revealing the underside of his briny-covered body, the salty sea powder disguised a once bold figure of a man, a black man, who did not cry out. The ship heaved and moaned; the planks creaked and screamed; the waves slapped and beat the sides of the ship. The man remained silent; he swallowed hard as the boy continued to bite. The boy gnashed his teeth, until the man’s foot bled forth the final seed. At last, the boy, with blood trickling from his white teeth, lifted his head with pride and showed the older man the salvaged seed that sat between the tips of his teeth.

With that painful pleasure, the priest from the line of Piye nodded gently to the boy before lowering his eye lids for the last time.
A jarring force accompanied by a loud bang sent the blue 2004 Honda Accord flying forward. Professor Delta Quinn barely had time to react as she saw herself fast zeroing in on the rear end of a semi. She instinctively turned the wheel to the left with surprising speed. With the wheel turned sharply, the car flew past the semi and sailed over the edge of State Route 52 above the median—airborne over a wide, deep gulley. Delta gripped the wheel of the car as it soared through the air and banged back to earth. Bouncing uncontrollably, the squat compact careened upwards and onto the other side of the median, landing directly in the path of oncoming traffic. As the car banged to the ground, the driver’s head slammed against the headrest.

Delta felt as if she were falling downward, as if she were falling from a cliff on a moonlit evening, darkness surrounded her. For a moment, she succumbed to the gentle, seductive warmth of the darkness, like a bedroom in which the draperies had been carefully drawn together sealing out the light, allowing one to slip into nocturnal dreams. Downward, downward, ever downward. She felt a vague sensation that she should stop this downward trajectory. Although the car seemed nonexistent and the professor felt as if she were free floating in space, she nonetheless attempted to press her foot against what she thought was a brake. It was all so strange. The velvety, dream-like darkness enveloped her; the physical sensations existed as if in her mind only; she floated untethered from reality, while pressing her foot against nothing. Indeed, her foot wasn’t even moving.

As if awakening from a dream, she heard a rapping on the car window that grew to a loud knocking. A voice called to her as a pain shot through her right side, a real pain. She tried to lift her arms but they refused to cooperate; they barely moved. She struggled as if
trying to get out of bed after a long illness—disconcertingly weak. She reached for her right side.

“Are you okay?” She heard the voice from the other side of the window.

“I, I’m … the seatbelt, it’s hurting my ribs,” she stumbled over the words.

“No, stay put,” the voice told her. “I need to direct oncoming traffic around your car. Don’t move until I tell you.”

Delta let her head dip gently back against the headrest, not noticing any pain from the presently emerging lump. On coming traffic? What oncoming traffic, she wondered.

Slowly she began to feel a sense of clarity return. It’s really quite bright, she realized. A sunny afternoon. Not dark at all. She attempted to lift her arms again; this time they moved. Slowly. A dream-like sensation lingered. She rolled the window down and caught the fragrance of English lavender and wild sage that grew along the highway as it wafted on the breeze of the late August air. Milkweed plants that hugged the guard rail had lost their summer flowers—the pink pom poms of spring. A monarch butterfly fluttered above the green leaves. Delta’s thoughts continued to flutter as well in languid lucidity, landing here and there. Where am I? Wasn’t someone just speaking to me? She breathed in the fragrance of the fields again; the lavender smelled soft. Everything else evaporated. She closed her eyes again. She didn’t hear the sirens of the police car nor did she have an awareness of the ambulance’s flashing lights as it arrived. She had no conception of how much time elapsed before hearing another voice.

“Are you okay?” A new voice asked. The car door was being opened. Regaining her strength, she released the seat buckle and swung her legs out tentatively.

“Yes, I think so,” she said putting a hand to the back of her head, amazed at how quickly a lump had sprouted on her scalp under her dark hair.

“Do you know what year it is?”
She hesitated. “… 2010.” It sounded right, but she felt as though she had guessed the answer.

“Do you know where you are?”
She thought for a moment, “No, I’m not sure, but I think I was on my way home from work.”

“Where do you work?”

Again the young woman considered the question put to her, “…I’m a professor. I work at Purdue University.”

“Who’s the president of the United States?” Odd question to be asking, she thought. “It’s not Bush,” she answered, stalling for more time, unable to recall the President’s name.

“No, it’s not Bush,” the man agreed with her. Again she waited, pursed her lips, longing for a lucid answer, but her memory felt fuzzy. She struggled to find the answer. The man turned away.

“No, wait. It’s Obama,” she answered without further hint of hesitation.

“Let me help you out. I’m Sheriff Turner,” he said offering his hand to her. “Do you think you can walk?” The sheriff had a plain face, simple features, nothing too big or too small, nondescript, mostly with thinning brown hair the color of chaff. He looked like a man who worked out in order to eat hefty meals of meat and potatoes, resulting in a thick waist that tested his belt, but also gave him a sturdy stance, rooted in a Midwestern mien.

“Yes, I think so,” she answered, taking the sheriff’s hand to steady herself. He retrieved her purse and handed it to her. She slung it over her shoulder and flipped her long dark hair from under the strap before taking a step. Delta wobbled a little as the sheriff and the EMT, who had just arrived, escorted her to the waiting ambulance on the opposite side of the median. She was dressed in cream-colored, Katherine Hepburn-style trousers with a brown silk blouse and heels that were not exactly made for hiking up or down the grassy knoll of the gulley. No one would describe her shoes as sensible, even on a good day. Upon reaching the ambulance, the medic assisted her up and into the back of the portable emergency room where a second medic felt the back of her head with his latex-gloved hand. He then provided the professor with an ice pack after discovering the large lump under her sable-colored hair.

“Yeah, she’s got a bump all right,” the first medic told the second.

“Concussion?”

“Probably.”
They offered to drive her to the hospital, but Delta declined. Instead, she pulled her cell phone from her purse and pressed *favorites*. The medics looked on disapprovingly. They listened as Professor Quinn spoke: “Mona, … Yes … Have you left the office yet…Could you do me a favor? I’ve been in a bit of an accident. No, no I’m fine, but the car isn’t … Could you pick me up and give me a lift home … State Route 52, close to the bridge … Ten minutes … You’re an angel.” The disappointed medics gave the professor less attention now; they had had a rather boring day; using the siren again would have given them something more to talk about later. They were hoping, at the very least, to drive her to the hospital.

“You should really have that bump looked at,” the EMT who had helped her across the street told her.

“Thanks, but I’m okay, really. I just need a good night’s sleep.”

“Unh, unh. That’s not gonna happen,” the other EMT, the one with a twang to his voice, told her. “You have a concussion. You need to be checked every two hours for 24 hours. You got to have a friend check on you. Wake you up every two hours.”

Delta slumped. She hadn’t slept well in over a week: first, she had been at a conference in NYC and she never slept well in hotel rooms—unfamiliar places always made her uncomfortable; second, the return flight had been delayed several hours—airports are not exactly designed for dreaming; and worse yet, she missed her ride back from the airport. When she finally did get a chance to sleep she received annoying prank phone calls; somebody kept calling and hanging up. But most disconcerting of all were threatening messages left on her voice mail. She had angrily erased them. All she wanted was one decent night of serious sleep. She sighed.

“You got somebody to check on you?” She heard the EMT asking.

She nodded as she thought of Mrs. Rushka, her neighbor, who was the kind of person—motherly, nurturing, who’d gladly check on Delta, but Delta being Delta probably wouldn’t bother the elderly woman. She knew that Mona would check on her, if she were to ask, but she probably wouldn’t do so. *It’s just a bump on the head.*

The medics let Delta sit in the back of the ambulance as the county sheriff took the report. He had used his own cruiser to block traffic as he moved her vehicle off the road. When he had returned he asked
for her “driver’s license,” which she gave him; “registration,” which she told him was in the glove compartment; and “insurance,” for which she produced a card and a number. The sheriff asked a few general questions before actually inquiring about the details of the accident.

“What happened exactly?” He handed the keys to the car to her, a car which now sat so brutally beaten that it would be dragged away like a losing pugilist from the ring—coach and trainer under each arm, toes dragging on the ground. She sighed.

“Someone rear ended me. That’s all I know, Sheriff.”

“Wow, the back of your car is pressed like apples to cider,” the second EMT announced. “Jimmy, did you see?” He addressed his partner.

“Yeah, yeah, I saw. Lady, you’re going to need a cemetery plot for that little coup,” the other EMT looked at his watch and gave his medical opinion of the car, pronouncing, “Time of death, 4:20 p.m.” Delta sighed again at the thought of it.

Turning her attention back to the sheriff, she asked, “Who helped me before you got here?”

“That was the trucker. He heard the bang and saw your car go veering off from his rear view mirror.”

“Did he see who hit me?”

“A yellow Hummer, newer model, but he didn’t get the license plate. After hitting you, the driver took off.”

She readjusted the ice pack, switching it to her left hand and warming her right hand by slipping it between her thighs. Water condensation dripped down the back of her neck. Her hair felt matted. She began to recall a few details—the yellow Hummer in her rear view mirror, how it seemed to have been accelerating toward her, and turning the wheel to keep from hitting the semi in front of her.

“It’ll be pretty hard to hide a yellow Hummer, especially one with blue paint on it. We’ve got a bulletin out on it,” the sheriff assured her. He stepped out of the ambulance as a second sheriff’s car arrived. After conferring with the deputy he climbed back into the ambulance to talk with Delta. “There aren’t any tread marks,
Professor Quinn. My guess: they weren’t paying attention, texting maybe, and didn’t see it coming.”

_Maybe_, Delta thought.

Less than ten more minutes passed when static, coming from the sheriff’s walkie-talkie, interrupted their conversation. Delta listened as the crackling voice on the other end informed the sheriff that a patrol officer in the next town had already found the Hummer at an exit near I-65. Abandoned. The officer had called in the plates and was waiting to hear whether it was a stolen vehicle.

“Likely it’s a stolen vehicle, abandoned by thieves after they hit you,” the sheriff said, shaking his head. “Sorry.”

“Couldn’t you try to get prints off the steering wheel?” she asked.

“Prints? Not for a hit and run with a minor concussion for an injury. Actually, the county doesn’t even have a lab. It’d be six months before we’d get results back from fingerprinting. This isn’t CSI, you know. Anyway, it was probably some joy riding kid and the county doesn’t have the money to track a teenage hoodlum. Sorry.”

The professor slumped. She wanted to tell Sheriff Turner that she didn’t think it was just a hit and run, but she was pretty sure he’d think she was crazy if she told him what she was thinking.

_Somebody intentionally ran me off the road. They could’ve killed me. Whoever it is, I think they’re doing this because of my research._ Research? What kind of research, the sheriff would ask. _Narrative research, I’d answer._ Narratives? _Like bedtime stories, he’d say with an incredulous look on his face._ Sort of, I’d say, but more like sequestered stories. I think maybe I’ve stumbled onto one that’s more dangerous than I realized: I just don’t know which one. Or why. Worse yet, I don’t have a scrap of evidence. I never should’ve deleted those voice mails? The only thing I know is that all this started right after I returned from New York City eleven days ago. I know that’s not much help. No, I doubt very much that the sheriff would believe me. And why should he?

“No, the professor said. “I think that’s my ride pulling up now.”
CHAPTER 2
Wednesday, August 11, 2010—West Lafayette, IN

“How’s your head? Are you feeling okay?” Mona Barthes asked her academic advisor.
“I’ve had better days,” Delta answered and then followed by thanking her graduate advisee for the ride as she settled into the front seat of the little green Geo.
“No problem, professor,” Mona replied.
“And thank you for picking me up last night after the accident, too.”
“Really, no need to mention it. So, what’s the status on your car?” Mona asked as she drove down the road.
“I think the insurance company will declare it totaled.”
“And you?”
“I guess I made out better than the car. Just a minor concussion.”
“Maybe you should have stayed home,” Mona suggested.
“No, no. I need to get a few more things ready for classes. I’ll be fine.”
“Do you want me to help you?” Mona adjusted the rearview mirror as she spoke.
Delta didn’t answer. Instead, her thoughts drifted to the threatening phone calls she had received over the last week or so, yesterday’s car accident, Sheriff Turner’s questions, the EMTs’ comments, and the chat she’d had with her neighbor Mrs. Rushka.
“A man came by to see you, dear,” Mrs. Rushka had said.
“Really? Who was it?”
“He didn’t leave his name.”
“What did he look like?”
“Look like? Well, he looked a little blurry to me. I didn’t have my glasses on when he came to the door.” Mrs. Rushka had been of little help to Delta as she tried to figure out who had stopped by to see her and whether it had anything to do with the strange events of the last week and a half. Why would anyone send threatening messages or try
to run me off the road? Maybe, ‘the accident’ was just an accident.
Maybe, I’m just being paranoid.

“Professor Quinn, … Delta … Delta!” The voice persistently grew louder until Delta responded. She turned. Now, facing Mona, who looked at her with concern, Delta apologized.

“I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“I asked whether you want me to help you with anything today?”

“Oh, no thanks. I’ll be fine. I’ve just had a lot on my mind lately.

“Obviously. Do you want to talk about it?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

“I’ve seen you preoccupied before, but not like this,” Mona pressed as she drove them west on State Road 26. “Usually you’re preoccupied with your research or—”

“Let’s change the subject.”

“Fine,” Mona said with mild exasperation. “How was the conference? It was an interdisciplinary conference, wasn’t it? Rhetoric, anthropology, and economics?”

“Yes. It went well. A few people asked for the paper.”

“Did you get any phone numbers?” Mona asked in a teasing tone.

“I gave my business card to one man when he asked about the study, but he never called. I wouldn’t have gone out with him anyway. I mean, he was a total stranger.”

“When you’re at a conference you’re allowed to get a little wild,” the younger woman encouraged her advisor. “So you talked to him after the presentation?” Mona said with curiosity.

“Yes, he wanted to know more about the study.”

“The one about the farm family?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm, was he from Rhetoric, Anthropology or Economics?”

“He never said. And then I lost track of him. He sort of disappeared into the crowd,” Delta said without emphasis, dismissing the event and memory of it.

“Yeah, I bet he wanted a date and got too nervous to ask you. Was he handsome?”

“I don’t know, maybe. He had blond hair, medium height, thirtyish; he was okay.”
“I wish I could have gone with you. I love New York City, but don’t tell my brother I said that; his loyalty lies with Chicago.”

Mona glanced over at Delta expecting a reply, but Delta had become quiet again, which worried Mona. Delta’s thoughts were clearly in another place and time. Mona glanced again from the road back to her advisor—the woman with dark wispy hair that fell in lustrous strands over her shoulders gazed out the front window; her green eyes, which usually seemed bright and engaging, were now focused far away, making her appear distant and preoccupied. Delta had been Mona’s advisor for nearly a year and still Mona felt as if Delta was a mystery, always helpful, but never very forthcoming about herself. She had shared that she had been from a large Irish-Catholic family one day when the two of them had met over a drink at a local patio bar to talk about Mona’s fellowship possibilities. Holidays were coming up and Mona merely asked if the professor had a large family and if she would see them for the holidays. Mona had always been curious about the way the professor had said it: “I came from a large Irish-Catholic family,” she had said with her voice trailing away, as if it were in the past. No amount of nudging would get her to open up further about her family. Beyond that, Mona knew almost nothing other than academic information about Delta. For now, Mona decided to focus on the fact that someone with a concussion should be watched carefully. Thus, the advisee drew her advisor back from her reverie with unimportant and somewhat annoying small talk, “So what are you teaching this semester?”

Delta took a moment to respond. “Undergraduate classes—Diversity and Narratives at Work COM 328 and Rhetoric and Public Relations COM 495.”

“You almost make me wish I could be an undergraduate again. I love your stuff on narratives, especially sequestered narratives,” she fawned.

“Thanks. But you need to focus on your dissertation,” Delta advised amiably.

“I did say almost make me want to take another class,” Mona smiled as she emphasized her point. “Honestly, I’m really glad to have courses behind me and when the dissertation is done it’ll be like
a weight off my shoulders. Hey, I never asked you what your dissertation was about.”

“A whistleblower and what she faced after revealing unethical practices at her workplace.”

“Fascinating stuff—sequestered stories. Did you publish the dissertation results?” But before Delta answered, Mona interrupted her own train of thought; after all, she was just trying to keep her advisor engaged when she remembered something else. “Oh, by the way, we have a faculty meeting today,” Mona announced.

“How did you know that?” Delta asked.

“I’m the grad student representative this semester, remember?”

“Oh yes, I had forgotten.”

“It’s at 2:30, but I don’t know what room we’re in,” Mona added.

“No problem. We’ll look it up when we get to my office.”

“Do you want a ride home after the meeting?”

“Like I said yesterday, you’re an angel.”

“Not me, I’m not even religious. Actually, I’m …”

Delta’s thoughts drifted again and she lost track of what Mona was saying as they continued driving toward Purdue University. She kept thinking of the threatening phone call, ‘the accident,’ and her research. The thought of the accident motivated her to turn her head to see if anyone was following them, as she did a sudden pain shot through her neck and shoulder. “Son of a …” she said grabbing the side of her neck.

“You okay?”

“No,” she confided at last gently stretching her neck to one side. Delta was exhausted, in pain, and confused about everything. “I don’t think the accident was an accident.” She finally blurted out.

“What? Why not?”

“Before the accident, I received a number of calls, but the person on the other end kept hanging up.” She held her neck.

“Who was it?”

“I don’t know. But there was definitely somebody there. I could hear breathing. And then the person hung up.”

“A perv,” Mona concluded.

“Maybe, but on Monday I got another call. And …”

“And?”
“And this time a man’s voice on the other end said, *Stop what you’re doing.*”

“Stop what you’re doing,” Mona repeated. “That’s weird. What did he mean by that?” Delta shook her head gently and the dangly earrings that intermingled with her midnight-colored hair, tussled from side to side.

“And then, the very next day, Tuesday—yesterday—BAM, the car accident. I’m run off the road by somebody driving a stolen vehicle. A bright yellow Hummer, no less. I have a bad feeling about this.”

“A bright yellow Hummer,” Mona repeated. “See that’s the thing. Who steals a Hummer just to run somebody off the road? And bad guys don’t steal brightly-colored anything. It’s probably just a coincidence,” Mona comforted Delta. She paused and then added, “But it is curious.” Retracting her reassurance, she finally asked, “Did you save the phone message?”

“No, I didn’t think of that. I guess I just wanted it to go away.”

“Probably nothing,” Mona returned to her first assessment of the situation.

After parking the car, Mona noticed the stiffness with which Delta moved and so she helped her with her bag of books. “Here, I’ll get those,” she said taking the bag from Delta and swinging it over her shoulder. As they walked toward Beering Hall, Delta navigated the conversation away from her own troubles and instead engaged Mona in conversation about her classes. After reaching her second floor office in the west wing of the building, Delta unlocked the door.

“Thanks, Mona. You can just set those over there,” she said of the books. “Oh, and let me look up where the faculty meeting is,” Delta added as she sat down at her computer and began clicking the keys. She put in her password and waited for the default page to appear and for her email to pop up. Mona now looked over the professor’s shoulder. That’s when they both saw it—the mysterious message:

**CEASE AND DESIST!**

**YOUR RESEARCH IS DANGEROUS.**

“Are you seeing this?” A startled Delta asked Mona.
“I am. I am,” Mona reassured her. Then to their surprise, the message dissolved into a million little pixels as did Delta’s hope of having evidence that confirmed that the events of the last few days were more than mere coincidence.

“Oh my gosh,” Mona exclaimed. “You were right. Somebody doesn’t want you to do your research. That accident wasn’t an accident!”

Delta swallowed hard as her stomach nearly lifted into her throat and then she pressed her hands against her diaphragm, holding herself together. Now that Mona had witnessed it, it seemed all too real. There was no denying what was happening to her.

“You should report this to the police,” Mona told her, “and to the CT people, too.”

Delta couldn’t stop staring at the computer screen where the message had been, a place where the frazzled dots had fizzled into nothingness. A blue screen of death appeared before her. It took a moment for Delta to recover, and then she turned to Mona.

“Okay,” she said composing herself long enough to assure Mona that she would indeed call the campus police and the Computer Technology Services Center and added, “But let’s keep this between us, for now.” Her words seemed reasonable but her voice sounded a bit unsteady and her leg jittered up and down as she spoke. “Okay?”

“Sure,” Mona promised, “You mean until you know who’s behind this?”

“Exactly. So for now, we should both get back to work. There’s a lot to do before classes start.” Delta wanted nothing more than to figure this out and have her life return to normal. Actually, she wanted the whole issue to just disappear, but she knew that Mona was right; she would have to call the police. The problem wouldn’t go away on its own. Delta sent Mona on her way after thanking her one more time for the rides and assuring her that she would call the police. And then she shut her office door.
CHAPTER 3

Wednesday, August 11, 2010—New York City

Robert Cornelius Brown sat waiting in the comfortable, burgundy-colored leather booth at La Fia’s, an upscale Italian restaurant in mid-Manhattan. He had barely lifted the glass of water to his lips, when his old friend Jason Slaughtery walked through the door and removed his sunglasses to allow his eyes to adjust to the dim light. Brown gave a slight wave of his hand to indicate his presence. Slaughtery walked to the table. Brown stood to greet him.

“Downtown Bobby Brown,” Jason Slaughtery addressed his friend and slapped his hand into his old college room-mate’s hand, and then with a turn of his wrist, the slap became a hardy handshake. The nickname—’Downtown’—had been given to Bobby Brown because he lived in and for Lower Manhattan—the downtown business district of New York City; Bobby Brown breathed in Wall Street and never wanted to exhale.

“How ‘bout them Yankees!” Slaughtery added. In return, ‘Downtown’ grasped his friend by the shoulder, extending their handshake into a manly hug.

“You bet, you gotta love them Yankees.”

Jason glanced around before sitting down.

“Nice place,” Jason decided.

“It baffles me,” Brown said returning to his seat across from his friend.

“How so?” Jason asked stretching an arm across the back of the booth.

“An Italian restaurant owned by a Japanese investor. What’s this global world coming to, my friend?”

“Fusion?”

“Something like that.” Brown smiled.

The server arrived and delivered a second glass of water along with a rote script. “My name is Emily. I’ll be taking your order today. Would you care for a drink?”
Bobby Brown nodded for Jason to order first. Brown would clearly be picking up the tab and it appeared that he could well afford it, even if Slaughtery ordered top shelf booze. Dressed in a Giorgio Armani suit with signature-style Forzieri tie, Bobby clashed with his more casually-dressed friend. It’s not that Jason Slaughtery didn’t have the money, he just preferred a more casual, rock star, jeans-and-a-jacket-look. In addition, Bobby Brown’s copper-colored skin and shaved head contrasted with Jason’s naturally-light complexion and full head of blond hair. For all their differences, they shared a love for fast money, gambling, the stock market, sports, beautiful women and scotch.

“Well, Emily, I think a scotch on the rocks would quench my thirst. Make it Johnny Walker Blue.”

“I’ll have the same,” Brown told the waitress; not overly concerned about his choice, he had other things on his mind. The waitress disappeared.

“Sorry I had to ask for your help with this project on such short notice. But I had to go out of town over the weekend.” Brown told his friend.

“What’s her name?” Slaughtery asked. Bobby Brown smiled.

“You know me too well.”

“So, how are you handling the heat?” Jason asked Bobby.

“Do you mean the sweltering August humidity, the state of the economy, or the company’s reputation?”

“Your choice,” Jason Slaughtery quipped with a smile as the waitress returned with a tray and two drinks.

“May I take your order?” She asked.

“Just drinks today, sweetheart.” Bobby Brown had already forgotten her name. She scooped up the menus. Brown raised his glass in unison with his friend as the waitress departed.

“Always good to see you, my friend. Business or not,” Jason told Bobby Brown.

“Likewise.”

Slaughtery sipped the refreshing scotch and felt the cool ice cubes against his lips. He then put the side of the glass against his forehead.

“It’s a hot one.”

“Indeed. So how did it go?”
“It must be tough running interference for the company you work for.”
“It’s a steady paycheck, my friend. You should try it.”
“I like the freedom of freelance, taking whatever job appeals to me at the time.”
“You could work for us full-time, if you ever decided that’s what you want. RichField Corporation is always looking for public relations investigators that they can rely on.”
“Okay, fine. So what were you able to find out about the professor?”
He took out a flip notebook from the inside of his jacket pocket and began to read. “She stayed at the conference hotel. Woke up at—
“Are you kidding me?”
“What?”
“You still use paper notes?”
“I’m not a techno-phobe; note pads can’t be hacked.”
“Okay, go on.”
“As I was saying, she stayed at the conference hotel; woke up at 7:00 a.m.; masturbated for … oh, no, wait, that was me.”
Brown not only cracked a smile, but laughed at his friend’s joke. Slaughtery was pleased with himself.
“Okay, on the level.” This time he pulled his phone from his pocket and pulled up his digital notes. “She really did stay at the conference hotel. Arrived Friday afternoon. Took a walk around the city after checking in, went back to her room early. Saturday she attended two panel sessions, before presenting her own paper.” Jason glanced up at the serious looking Bobby Brown. “I deserve combat pay for sitting through ultra-boring, academic presentations.”
“Bore me. What did she say?”
“You can listen to the whole thing if you like. I taped it.”
“Summarize the highlights for me. What does she know? What did she report?”
“That’s two different things. She didn’t provide her full paper. It’s coming out this week in an academic journal. The bad news, what she reported on does indeed hint at, but not confirm, that something
fishy is going on in the seed and chemical area of agriculture, although she didn’t name RichField specifically, as she used pseudonyms throughout, it might not be difficult to connect the dots to them and their illegally testing genetically-modified organisms and possibly dangerous or at least questionable chemical compounds in U.S. farm fields. Oh and she also quoted the farmer as saying the government ag reports are falsified in favor of big corporations.”

Brown wiped perspiration from his upper lip. “Pseudonyms, that much is good. Did she have any proof or can it be a he said/she said?”

“Strictly he said/she said. Are these the same farms that you and I visited as ‘investigators,’ a year or so ago?”

“I think so. And if so, in that case, I may need your help with damage control.”

“To be honest with you, I think her focus was elsewhere. She’s a rhetorical ethnographer.”

“A what?”

“Ethno-rhetorician, something like that. Does it matter?”

“You tell me.”

“She’s focused on humanities. She’s interested in rhetoric and the construction of identity. In this case, how farmers frame who they are through the stories that they tell. Discursive issues. Harmless stuff.”

“Listen to you? ‘Rhetoric and the construction of identity’! ” This time Brown leaned back with a smug smile on his face.

“I took notes, remember?”

“We might have to do something about her.”

“Like what?” Slaughtery sounded defensive.

“You know, destroy the originals … or her credibility.”

“Really, I think it’s harmless stuff. And don’t forget she used pseudonyms; she never used the actual name of the company. RichField should be safe.”

“Is she pretty?”

“Yes, but—

“Did you get her number?”

“Yes.”

Brown shook his head at his friend. “Don’t let your dick do the thinking.” Then he leaned forward, “Did the thought cross your mind
that pseudonyms come from original names. She knows more than you think, maybe more than she realizes, but I suspect, either way, we’ll get word to ‘investigate’ further. Possibly a road trip. Are you up for that or was she so pretty that you can’t think straight?” ‘Downtown’ suddenly appeared as if he had an epiphany.

“Oh God, did you sleep with her?”

“No, for chrissake Bobby, I’m more professional than that.”

“Did you talk to her?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you say?”

“I said—Your research is fascinating and you really seem to care about the farm family you studied. I’m interested in reading more. Could I have a copy of your paper?”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. And for the record, I do think she genuinely cares about those people.”

“Don’t get sucked in. She cares about herself. She’s no different from us. You know what she cares about? She cares about getting published. Think about it. Was she back in the fields actually helping that family or was she just talking about them at some conference, where nobody really gives a shit, giving a presentation, racking up vita hits for tenure; get my point?”

Slaughtery sighed, realizing that his friend was probably right.

“Now, are you in or not? I think I’ll need help if we have to travel back to the heartland.”

“Of course, if the money is right.”

“That’s my boy. Yes, the money will be solid.”

“In that case, it sounds like old times. By the way, how did you know about her research before it was presented at the conference or published in the journal?”

“RichField keeps people on retainer, simply to keep us abreast of these kinds of things.”

Jason thought for a moment, “You mean someone close to her?”

“Close enough. Somebody at the university, I think.”

“You don’t know who for sure?”

“Actually, I got the feeling that we might be the backup on this project. I’m not sure how corporate found out about her research. Let
me listen to some of the tape,” Brown held out his hand. Slaughtery
tapped an icon on his phone, turned the sound up slightly, set the
phone on the table for Brown to hear.

“Fast forward if you want. The stuff about corporate evil is near
the end.” Slaughtery slid out of the booth and headed for the men’s
room.

As soon as Slaughtery was out of sight, Brown took the phone and
tapped a different icon, quickly selected the word ‘contacts,’ scanned
for Delta Quinn’s phone number and then added it to his own list of
contacts before Jason returned.